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 * Semonides on Women: Beauty and the Beast? by R.L. Fowler *
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"Misogynism" is a Greek word, made up of misos (hatred) and gyne (woman); sadly, it is quite appropriate that such a word should be taken from the Greek, for women were not always highly esteemed in Greek society. In Greek literature, there is a strong misogynistic strain, beginning with grumpy old Hesiod in his Works and Days (ca. 700 B.C.), who makes the first woman, Pandora, responsible for all the evils of the human race. (Eve in the Bible performs a similar role.) Not long after Hesiod, the poet Semonides, living on the island of Amorgos, composed another poem which can also be regarded as misogynistic.

In this poem, Semonides claims that there are many different types of women, which he compares to different animals; indeed, he puts the matter rather directly and naively by saying that women were "made" from these animals. Thus, there is a fox-woman, a dog-woman, a donkey-woman, a weasel-woman, and so on. Each of these types is given a set of not very complimentary characteristics, according to the nature of the animal in question (see some of the excerpts below). Only one woman is any good: that made from the bee, who is industrious, tends her home well and loves her husband. This is the type all women should be -- but, alas, most are not. And the irony of the situation, according to Semonides, is that husbands usually think their wives are good like the bee-woman; only other men can see that they're really stuck with a horse or a monkey.

Usually this poem is interpreted as straight-forwardly misogynistic. There is certainly no denying the misogynism in it. But it may be that the poem's primary purpose is not to express the writer's hatred of women,

and convince others of his point of view; he may have written the poem for some other purpose, in the course of which a certain uncomplimentary attitude towards women emerges. He may have been trying to entertain an audience with his outrageous conceit. In other words, the intent of the poem is humorous.

Recently a suggestion has been made about the makeup of the original audience. In Classical Views for 1984 (one of the journals of the Classical Association of Canada -- student subscriptions are available!), Leslie Schear observed that, unlike most other poems where women are discussed, the women in this one are all wives. Perhaps the occasion was the wedding-feast which the bridegroom gave for the other members of his phratry, an association with religious overtones of persons loosely related by blood ties. This was the ancient equivalent of a stag party--except that most of the party-goers would have been married men. The game would then be to guess which wife of which man in the room corresponded to each of the animal-types. Each man would smugly assume that another man's wife was being described. When the good bee-woman is finally mentioned, everyone might think with inner satisfaction that his own wife matched the description; or, if he were charitable, he might think that a compliment was being paid to the bride. But then comes the sting at the end: everyone thinks his wife is good, but really ... At this point the guests will realize they've been had. Their own wives are on the list somewhere.

If this interpretation is correct, we are dealing with a rather clever poet who thought of a good way to enter-

tain his friends for the evening. His jokes about the horrors of marriage are of a familiar type, still heard at weddings today. Some of these jokes are not always in the best of taste, but they do not necessarily imply that the person who makes the joke seriously holds such views about marriage. Sometimes they do, but that can't be judged from the joke -- only from knowing the person. In the case of Semonides' poem, we don't know the author personally; we only have the joke. You can decide for yourself whether it's in good taste or bad, or even funny at all. But the interpretation of the poem as an attempt at humour at least allows the possibility that it's not really misogynistic-- or not as much as we thought. That would be a pleasant change from Pandora.

Excerpts from Semonides' poem:

The pig-woman: "In her house, everything's befouled with dirt and lies on the ground. She herself never takes a bath, never washes her clothes, and grows fat squatting on the dung-heap."

The dog-woman: "She wants to hear everything, know everything; she roams and pokes about everywhere, and barks even at people she thinks she sees. No husband could shut her up -- not with threats, not if you knocked out her teeth with a rock in a rage, nor again with kindly persuasion."

The donkey-woman: "She'll do what one has to if you're liberal with threats and a cudgel; but she eats in the pantry day and night, and eats on the hearth too. Stubborn as she is, though, when it comes to love, she'll take anybody."

The weasel-woman: "A wretched, dismal tribe. There's nothing nice or desirable or lovely or delightful about this one. She's always thieving from the neighbours, and often gulps down chunks of meat left out at the sacrifice."

The horse-woman: "She avoids the trouble of chores, this one; you won't find her within a yard of the mill-stone or a sieve, or heaving the muck from the house or slaving over a hot stove, trying to avoid the soot. She bathes her grimy body two, maybe three times a day, drenches herself in perfume, and always sports a finely-combed, high-rise coiffure, bedecked with blooming flowers. She looks oh so fine-- but woe to the fellow what's got her."

The monkey-woman: "Now this is definitely the greatest disaster Zeus ever inflicted on a man. First of all she's ugly. Everybody in the whole town laughs at her when she's out. She's got a short stump of a neck, and she can hardly move about -- she's got so much leg, and so little bottom. Ah wretched is he that takes into his embrace such a heap of trouble as this. She knows all the tricks in the book, just like the monkey -- and she doesn't mind being laughed at. She does no good for anyone; her every waking moment is consumed by one thought only: 'What's the biggest mischief I can do someone today?'"